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SUBJECT: MEDIA REACTION; KIRCHNER-CHAVEZ ALLIANCE VIS-@-VIS THE  
U.S., BLAIR AND PARTIAL PULLOUT OF UK TROOPS FROM IRAQ, 02/22/07;  
BUENOS AIRES

#### 1. SUMMARY STATEMENT

Papers lead with President Kirchner's strong defense of Argentina's alliance with Chavez while defying U.S. pressures to contain him, and PM Blair's announcement of a reduction in the number of UK soldiers in Iraq, in sharp contrast to the U.S. troop buildup in Baghdad.

#### 2. OPINION PIECES

- "Kirchner Warns U.S. he Won't Keep Chavez at Bay"

Lucas Colonna, on special assignment in Venezuela for daily-of-record "La Nacion", writes (02/22) "... During his visit to Puerto Ordaz, and without any margin for second interpretations, Kirchner elliptically launched a tough warning to the U.S. by assuring he does not and will never keep Chavez at bay in the region, because he considers him a strategic ally.

"His definition was aimed at the Bush administration... 'Nobody can feel upset about the integration of our two peoples. We have to put an end to patronizing theories from an institutional and political viewpoint,' he said after signing bilateral agreements in the Orinoco oil basin.

"'Much has been said lately, about some countries having to keep others at bay, regarding President Lula or myself, having to contain Chavez. This is an absolute mistake. Together with brother Chavez, we build South America as a space of happiness for our peoples,' Kirchner added. The place and time he picked for this warning were not by chance. In fact, this presidential trip took place under Washington's eyes, only two weeks after the Burns/Shannon visit.

".... Kirchner's studied gesture was undoubtedly clear. He offered strong support to Chavez, with whom he redoubled his partnership during this last visit which ended yesterday.

".... Kirchner's words sparked satisfaction and some surprise in Chavez, who stared at him in awe, standing at his side. And when it was his turn to talk, he took the opportunity to thank him for his words.

"'I want to thank you for saying what you just said. The oligarchic Empire is never tired of trying to sow discord between us,' said Chavez in turn. 'And if Kirchner and Lula are those who keep Chavez in check... in Buenos Aires there are some who say that a relationship with Chavez is inconvenient. Those are the ones that gave in to U.S. Imperialism and allowed it to ransack the country.'

".... By the end of the meeting, Kirchner had already made clear a

highly valued political support for the Bolivarian leader in his fight with the U.S."

- "Uneasiness in Washington"

Hugo Alconada Mon, daily-of-record "La Nacion" Washington-based correspondent, says (02/22) "Kirchner's criticism in Venezuela yesterday sparked uneasiness in Washington, where nobody is surprised by his alliance with Chavez. But the Bush administration maintained its official silence, in sync with the more pragmatic vision it pushes forward in its bilateral relations."

"'With President Kirchner we have different views on Venezuela,' said a USG source before the presidential trip kicked off. 'He believes Chavez can be moderate and we believe he jeopardizes Venezuelan democracy,' said the source."

"For the time being, the White House doesn't trust Buenos Aires will be able to bring any solution for Venezuela, according to people in the Republican Party, who also expressed their 'displeasure.'"

- "Gesture Towards Caracas that Doesn't Break Ties With Bush"

Jorge Rosales, daily-of-record "La Nacion" deputy-editorialist, opines (02/22) "In President Kirchner's logic, moving towards a strategic alliance with Chavez doesn't mean breaking ties with the U.S. But his pragmatism places him in a key position of support for the Bolivarian leader's projects, which are against Washington's interests."

"Kirchner's tough response to those who want him - together with Lula -- to contain Chavez' far-fetched ideas seem to have more to do with Venezuela's domestic affairs than Chavez' intentions to export the Socialist revolution to the rest of Latin America, standing on his petrodollars."

".... There are founded fears on the institutional risks faced by Venezuela due to Chavez' scarce respect for Republican institutions and democratic harmony in his country. And there is also the suspicion that the economic power of Venezuela may be used to fuel organizations that have little to do with democracy in certain countries of the region (such as the unstable Bolivia)."

".... Is Kirchner's gesture to the Bolivarian leader a sign to turn his back on the U.S. and punish Bush, on the eve of his imminent trip to the region? This doesn't seem to be his primary goal at this stage of bilateral relations with the U.S., in which its officials have learned to recognize the Argentine President's pragmatism in some of his moves, and his acknowledgement of the need for harmonic relations."

"It's, instead, a direct gesture to Chavez himself, who became the country's key financial support with the issuance of bonds for 4.2 billion dollars."

".... With the terribly bad image of the U.S. President in the region and his loss of domestic power due to Iraq, punishing him doesn't seem profitable in terms of domestic politics like it was some months ago."

"When in 2003 the U.S. distrusted of the new Argentine President's rapprochement with Chavez, Washington received a comforting message from Buenos Aires: Kirchner might contain the coup-monger. But those were other times. The region's reality is different now and, above all, oil price is very different. The value of the oil barrel allowed Chavez not only to consolidate his domestic power, but also to strengthen his intention of becoming the leader of Latin American opposition to the U.S."

"This is why the U.S. believes Argentina may play another role, because it no longer has the strength to back Chavez. In order to do this, it will need the help of more powerful nations".

- "Jugglers"

Fernando Gonzales, leading "Clarn" political editor, writes (02/22) "It's not easy being Chavez' friend. Kirchner and Lula usually move as skilful jugglers in their relations with the garrulous

Venezuelan. With him they share the idea of a more powerful regional market and even the rejection of some U.S. symbols. But their paths move in different directions when Chavez refers to Bush as 'the devil' or exchanges words of praise with the Iranian President. In order to calm the U.S., Argentina and Brazil usually offer themselves as mediators of Chavez in every regional summit. But of course, yesterday, in Venezuela, and given Chavez' lavish financial display, 'Latin American brotherhood' prevailed."

- "New Complexity"

Mario Wainfeld, leftist "Pagina 12" managing editor, opines (02/22) ".... The scenario combines an era of political changes in South America, a bountiful age for commodity prices and the emergence of gas riches in Venezuela and Bolivia.

"Chavez is an additional factor in this context. It's not the first time his country benefits from oil bonanza, but the vast political project headed by the Bolivarian leader, taking advantage of his particular richness at this particular time, is a novelty.

"The State Department is right on one thing: the big news of this era is Chavez, his political decision, his drive. His strategic decision to join Mercosur implies both a leap in the quality of the process as well as a crisis.

"'Some partner', may Lula and Kirchner say of Chavez. The Argentine and the Brazilian, using their good judgment, preferred to risk having a powerful, rich and untamed ally, rather than making the double mistake of losing him...."

- "Brits and Fear That a 'Pullout' May Conceal a 'Move Forward'"

Graciela Iglesias, daily-of-record "La Nacion" London-based correspondent, writes (02/22) "... Yesterday, nobody - not even the most eccentric activist in Westminster - celebrated the announcement of the beginning of a UK troop pullout.

"The lack of euphoria, far from being a surprise, is another signal of Tony Blair's damaged credibility.

".... Cynicism prevails in the public opinion right now. The fact that Blair mentioned a 'pullout' immediately led some to interpret his words in the opposite direction. More specifically, as the

indication of an 'up-coming' but yet veiled, 'allied move forward', not in Iraq, but on neighboring Iran.

".... The gradual withdrawal of British soldiers from Basra is aimed at reducing the risk of becoming targets of attacks from an infuriated community, over the eventual U.S. intervention on the other side of the border. In this context, Secretary Rice's reaction to yesterday's announcement saying 'the coalition remains intact' must be considered a genuine declaration which confirms this.

"But even those who don't believe in this hypothesis, criticize Blair. Because in their opinion, the reduction in the number of soldiers from 7,100 to 5,500, without a precise timetable, is viewed more like a gesture of domestic political convenience rather than the 'beginning of the end.'

".... Blair's chances of bowing out from the political arena amid hail and praise seem now as remote as prior to the announcement."

- "Reactions in Washington"

Ana Baron, leading "Clarín" Washington-based correspondent, says (02/22) "Following Blair's announcement yesterday, President Bush is as isolated as ever. All opinion polls indicate that 70% of the American people are against his policy in Iraq.

".... Powerful senator Ted Kennedy referred to the withdrawal of 1,600 British soldiers as 'a call of attention'. And his colleague, Joseph Biden, said Bush 'ought to follow Blair's example.'

".... Nevertheless, the White House decided to ignore reality once again, saying the pullout indicates things 'are improving' in Iraq.

"..... Blair's decision couldn't take place at a worst time. Precisely when Bush is trying to convince the U.S. people to support his initiative to send 12,000 more troops to Iraq, the British withdrawal goes in the opposite direction of Bush's strategy. It's another indicator of his isolation."

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